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Linking English Instruction to the Life of the Community Through the Use of the Round-Table Technique

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RAPIDLY displacing the old debate are the relatively new discussion forms of which the round-table is a prominent member. The objective of debating is to win an argument; debaters often prepare to argue, with equal vehemence, *either side* of a proposition in question. The objective of a panel discussion, open forum, symposium, or round-table, on the other hand, is to discover the truth.

The round-table technique is particularly adapted to help fulfill one of the greatest needs of English instruction, to link the activity of the classroom to the life of the community. As Francis Shoemaker says, "... direct participation in community life is a 'must' among other school experiences."¹

The student comes to the classroom from the community, and he will go from the classroom back to the community. Although other classes have a responsibility also, the English class, dealing as it does with communication, without which life in the community is ineffective or impossible, must assume the major responsibility for linking classroom activity to community life.

If the student is to learn to handle the tools of communication, that is, if he is to learn to read, write, speak, and listen, he must practice reading, writing, speaking, and listening. If he is to take an effective part in the life of his community, he must practice taking an effective part in the life of his community. Among many

¹ Shoemaker, Francis, "Communication and Community Life," *The English Journal*, 36:459, 1947.

other devices, the round-table technique, properly handled, gives practice in manipulation of these tools of communication, and can at the same time give the student the privilege of actually taking part in community life.

When topics have been chosen carefully, the round-table technique can teach students to read, that is, to look into a book or an article for a definite set of facts or values. As Dewey has said: "Learning begins not with premises, but with difficulties." An assignment in which a student reads "... the next twenty pages for tomorrow" more often than not presents him only the difficulty of scanning a certain amount of reading within a definite time limit. While he may, perhaps, seek information, the information is not the end for which he reads; he reads to obtain a mark on a report card. However, the situation changes when the student begins to read to solve a difficulty.

Perhaps the student is to appear on a round-table to discuss, in the light of world events, the advisability of universal military training. To discuss anything in the light of world events requires some knowledge of world events. Therefore, the student will read, according to his ability, such magazines as *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Current History*, or *Fortune*, and daily papers, the *World Almanac*, and other year books. He will consult recent editions of history books for events leading up to the present. Then, perhaps after consulting the *Reader's Guide*, he will read all the articles he can find which contain other people's opinions about universal military training in peace time. He has gathered information in order to form an enlightened, if tentative, opinion. He has been reading for a purpose—he is seeking information he will later use.

The round table-technique, again with carefully chosen topics, can also help teach students to write. The usual assignment, such as one as, "Tomorrow you will write a business letter. Choose your subject from those listed on page 112," while undoubtedly having some value, motivates the student to write only to fulfill an assignment. The letter will not be mailed; the purpose for which the letter is supposedly written is a pretended purpose, in itself offering no motivation.

However, when a student writes a letter to get information for a round-table discussion (and a skillful teacher can cause a likely situation to arise), he is actually planning to send the letter to the addressee. Having a definite purpose, he will seek to make himself clear. There is no pretended motivation; the purpose stated in the letter is actually fulfilled.

In one of our sophomore English classes, three young athletes were preparing a round-table discussion on the relative merits of six- and eleven-man football. One of them favored eleven-man football, but the other two favored six. They had a strong case, for they were students of a small school with a losing eleven-man team. The exponent of eleven-man football wished that he had opinions from some of the leading coaches, because he knew that they would be able to give opinions which would be significant. When we suggested that he write to some of them, the class were skeptical; they were still skeptical when he wrote. However, when he received a friendly, informative letter from Ray Eliot, praising eleven-man football, their attitudes changed. They saw the value of letter writing. It is a fact so obvious that it need not be argued here that such letters are invariably written with greater care than those composed merely to fulfill an assignment.

All teachers are familiar with the typical careless work handed in to fulfill the requirements of keeping a notebook. Many students keep notebooks, not to use, but to please the teacher. The situation is different, however, when the students are forced to read their notes in order to be able to present their share of a round-table to the class. The situation is different, again, when they are presented the task of writing up the final report which may follow when students are particularly proud of their achievement and want a permanent record of it.

The most obvious value of the round-table, however, is in teaching students to talk. Webster defines a recitation as "a class exercise in which students reply orally to questions for which preparation is expected." The round-table discussion has in its favor the fact that it is totally unlike the "recitation." The students aren't placed in the intimidating position of merely replying to questions which seek to determine whether their outside study periods have been spent in studying or in some frivolous occupation. At the round table students may talk freely, exchange ideas, and (in an ideal situation) attempt through the sharing of thoughts to determine the truth.

But there are other opportunities for a student to learn to talk. If the topic has been carefully selected, he will find it necessary to get information from leaders in his community. In an interview, the student learns to speak extemporaneously, as it were, paraphrasing his previously prepared questions according to the needs of the moment. He learns to follow leads given by the person interviewed, pointing to other questions which he had not previously prepared. Of all the skills, the one which may develop most notice-

ably through the use of the round-table technique is the ability to talk.

Most important, however, the round table teaches students to listen. It seems that a high-school student gets out of the habit of listening. He will listen to a question, but as soon as he is certain that he will not have to answer it, too often he will allow his thoughts to wander to pleasanter surroundings. He will listen while one or two students recite the stanza that was to be memorized, but by the time fifteen have recited the same thing, his thoughts have long ago followed his gaze to the freedom beyond the classroom window. He will listen, intermittently, to a class lecture, but like all of us he will not listen attentively, unless it is exceptionally interesting. But a student will attend the words of a person he is interviewing because he himself is asking the questions and seeking definite information. He will also listen to the members of a round-table because he can take an active part, if not as a participant, as one of the audience.

As the Committee on Basic Aims For English Instruction in American Schools reported: "The essence of democratic life lies in the voluntary association of individuals for the discussion of ideas, the formulation of principles, and the carrying-out of common purposes."² Through a careful use of the round-table discussion or some other suitable vehicle, these broad aspects of democracy can be taught in our English classes.

A crisis was pending in Cosmo City High School. As in so many other Illinois communities, the school system had become outdated. It was time for improvement: a survey committee had made a report recommending that the various school units throughout the county be brought together under a central administration, that an adequate senior high school building be erected, and that all students in the county be given the opportunity for the better education that the few town students were then receiving. There was, however, so much opposition to the plan—most of it uninformed—that the chance of voter ratification seemed in question.

There was a crisis also in the senior English class of Cosmo City High School, a more subtle crisis, existing only in the mind of Miss Grace, the English teacher, and then uncertainly. Miss Grace's two years of experience in teaching English seemed years

² *Basic Aims For English Instruction*, Dora V. Smith, Committee Chairman. Pamphlet publication of the National Council of Teachers of English, No. 3.

of vague dissatisfaction. True, she was one of the "liked" group of teachers. True, her classes were generally described as interesting. But true also, of this she was sure, little worth while was accomplished in them.

Her students had learned things. Each pupil who was capable had a long list of "vocabulary" words in his head with pat little definitions to match: such words as *cogitate*, *mensurate*, *levitation*, *cloy*, *crenulate*, *perspicuous*, *remunerate*. But the feeling of dissatisfaction heightened when she listened to their casual speech and read their themes—which used *think* for *cogitate*, *measurement* for *mensuration*, *smart* for *perspicuous*, and *pay* for *remunerate*. She had seemed to interest them when she translated *Macbeth*, but their nonrequired outside reading consisted chiefly of *Superman*, *True Story*, *True Detective*, *True Confessions*, and, at best, the *Saturday Evening Post*. They had responded satisfactorily when she had asked for the three-minute speech, but only two students ever talked before the assembly—and one had learned the ability in the F. F. A. speech contests, the other by presiding at sessions of the student council. They looked respectfully at the bulletin boards, but none of the students ever contributed to them. They were good listeners—none better. If only one could be sure that bright eyes turned one's way were not camouflaged vacant stares.

Miss Grace was not a conceiver of brilliant ideas, but neither was she one to overlook opportunity. A student one day apologized that it was not about the lesson but, "Is it true that they are going to tear down this high school and move it to Brownville [three miles away]?" Glancing at her watch, she had averred that it was not true. They were going to use the school as a junior high school and build another one in Brownville for all the students of the county. "But my dad said they were going to tear it down, and that my—uh—grandchildren would pay the bill."

Things were getting out of hand. The son of one of the committee members, Jim, almost—not quite, he remembered in time—almost spoke without raising his hand. "That's silly. Where'd he ever get an idea like that? Besides, the whole thing will only cost half a million bucks."

She hadn't known the cost, herself.

She had started to be sarcastic, but somehow the inflection became twisted as she said, "Perhaps you would rather discuss reorganization than 'The Lady of Shalott.'" Perhaps they would, indeed!

Had it not been for the bell she might have lost the decision by a technical knockout; she was about to ask the class to make

three-minute speeches, for tomorrow, on reorganization. As it was, she had time to think.

At the only meeting of the community which she had attended concerning the important subject of reorganization, an attempt had been made to hold a round-table discussion. She had deplored the fact that no one had known how to conduct such a discussion. She herself had used the technique in college speech classes, had liked its easy informality. Why didn't these people practice it effectively?

It was inevitable that she should eventually see the obvious answer: the people of the community were the students of yesterday. They acted on the basis of their past experiences. Before her each day sat the citizens of tomorrow—and their future acts would depend upon the experiences she provided for them. Perhaps, twenty years hence, another round-table discussion might not go so badly, because she had taught English.

Miss Grace disinterred a pamphlet given to her in college. In it was written: "Intelligent living in a democracy requires a high degree of proficiency in the four fundamental language arts: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It is imperative that young people acquire in the highest degree commensurate with their ability the power to read intelligently, to interpret meaning accurately, to examine critically what they read, and to apply it to socially desirable purposes."³ Using improvement of reading, writing, speaking, and listening as her objective, she organized a unit on reorganization centering upon the round-table technique.

Her class could be divided roughly into three groups: superior, average, and slow. Three of the students, all intelligent, could be counted on to have interest in the topic: Ralph, the boy whose father opposed the reorganization plan, Jim, whose father was a member of the committee which drew up the plan, and Wilma, a girl who seemed to be interested in everything. Six of the students would "go along" with the assignment because it would be the path of least resistance. Four boys and one girl would require special motivation. Paul and Bob hated everything but basketball, Darrell and Bill simply could not read, and consequently could do little else. Betty was interested only in Paul, who was interested only in basketball.

Since the topic had arisen spontaneously from the class, Miss Grace had no problem of presenting the subject. At the next class, however, she did take about fifteen minutes to tell the class why the topic was important. She cited the West Virginia school system,

³ *Ibid.*

which had been decadent and which was now exemplary. She discreetly cited the flaws in their own system, stressing the possibilities for improvement. She then asked the class whether they would be interested in doing some extended work on the subject, first going after the facts, and then acting on them as they saw fit. Of course, she felt the cold fear of the possibility of their expressing horror at such a project. The fear was groundless; they had suggested it.

On the second day, she allowed the class to organize, electing a president, vice-president, and secretary. She instructed them that the president would be responsible for seeing that they met their appointments for giving class reports, that the vice-president should assist the president, and that the secretary would be responsible for seeing that various interesting topics were written up, that materials were available, and that copy went to the school paper. The officers were to work through committees, always in consultation with her, the teacher. At Miss Grace's suggestion, a committee was appointed to meet with her before the next class meeting. The president, Ralph; the vice-president, Paul (who was very popular because of his prowess at basketball); and the secretary, Wilma, were on the committee by virtue of their offices. The president appointed, also, two other girls.

Meeting with the committee after school, Miss Grace talked with them (not *to* them) for half an hour, emphasizing that the class had a chance, by gathering information and using it, to better the lives of everyone in the community. She wanted the committee to present the problem to the class. One boy was against reorganization. She wanted him to tell the class why. Wilma was in favor of it—why? Paul, she suggested, should tell about the inadequacy of the present gym and the possibility of getting a new gym under the reorganization program. She told them, also, that their conduct at the round table would be a model for the conduct of the other students, and then gave them pointers on the technique of conducting a round-table. For instance, she outlined the duties of the chairman as being (1) to open the discussion with a brief prefatory statement of the subject for discussion, (2) to introduce the speakers and their topics (each speaker was to have an initial three-minute period to sum up his stand on the issue; she had borrowed this system from the symposium), (3) to make transitional remarks between speeches, (4) to ask leading questions of speakers, if necessary, to draw out any ideas not already mentioned, (5) to recognize members of the audience or round-table who desired to comment, (6) to keep the discussion on the

subject, and (7) to summarize, at the conclusion, what had been said.

The next day the class was conducted by the students; the round-table discussion, rather stiff and formal at first, lapsed into good-natured informal discussion after one of the members of the panel inadvertently referred to the P. T. A. as the W. P. A.

The class took some part, not so great a part as the teacher had wished, but she was satisfied since it was their first attempt. Later, when a student asked, "How can you grade us on discussions like this?" she answered that those who took the greatest part, contributed the best information and wisest thinking, who were most polite and considerate of the opinions of others with whom they happened to disagree, who talked, yes, but who also listened, would naturally get the best grades. Although she did not plan to emphasize grade motivation, she felt that the student's question gave her an excellent opportunity to list the desirable characteristics of a participant in a discussion. She believed, also, that some students who took part at first for grades might later become so interested that they would attain other, better motivations.

The first day could be considered a success, she felt, though no great amount of information had been given out. At least they had learned something about the technique of handling such a discussion.

She herself conducted the class next day, spending the period tracing education from the first schools of New England to the most modern schools of today.

On the third day, after she had turned the meeting over to the president, the class outlined its objectives. They were general and fairly inclusive:

1. All people of the community, in and out of school, should make decisions concerning the advisability of reorganizing the Cosmo school system, based on an evaluation of all the information available.

2. It is the duty of each informed person to pass his information to others. It may be the duty of this class to pass on its information to students, parents, and other citizens.

On the fourth day, after making a list of all the materials available, they designated students to investigate them, dividing the class into teams, and delegating responsibilities:

To report on the survey committee's report.....	six students
To interview local superintendent of schools.....	two students
To interview the committee members.....	three students
To interview local P. T. A. president.....	two students
To interview local J. C. president.....	two student

To glean all possible information from Miss Grace's file of <i>N. E. A. Journals</i>	three students
To collect pertinent statistics from <i>Illinois Blue Book</i>	two students
To list articles from <i>Reader's Guide</i> about school reorganiza- tion in general.....	two students
To trace any information available in the school or municipal library	two students

Despite the fact that it would have been a good thing to place pupils in groups heterogeneously according to intelligence, she let the class choose the committees. However, by intent, accident, or coincidence, the class chose usually workable groups.

With the fourth day she suspended regular discussion in class about the topic, confining class time to an initial ten-minute question-and-answer period. However, she met privately, after school and during her free period, all the committees *before* their interviews, or before they began research. Thus, she instructed them individually about interview or research technique. She also referred them to such books as *Senior English Activities* by Hatfield et al, *Units in English* by Paul and Kincheloe, and the Tressler *English in Action* series, which contain excellent information concerning interviews. Among other things she cautioned them that they should always secure a prior appointment for an interview, that promptness was imperative, that briefness was essential but that thoroughness was necessary to the accomplishment of the objective, that it was all right to take a few notes, that the reporters should leave within half an hour unless the person interviewed showed a desire to have them stay longer, and that the interview should be written up immediately after its completion.

Then she insisted that each group have another appointment with her before they presented their information to the class. She always emphasized that class time was too valuable to be wasted by students or teachers.

Throughout the unit Miss Grace, sometimes quite unconsciously, emphasized that students should take notes carefully if they expected to use them before the class, that they should talk distinctly and correctly if they expected the class to understand them, and that they should gather information accurately if the class and community were not to be misinformed. At no time after the first student inquiry did she mention grades. Amazingly, the students continued to work anyway.

After all reports were given, the class constructed an outline for a long theme on the topic, *Why the Cosmo School System Must Be Reorganized*, and consigned it to two of the better students

for rewriting as a theme, wrote several school newspaper articles, and sent four letters to the editor of the local paper. In each case different pupils were elected to write up the information.

Darrell and Bob, who had both used lack of interest as a cover-up for their inability to do creditable work on the unit, were finally forced to go to Miss Grace and admit their ignorance, after they had been assigned to write letters to the editor. She talked with them (she had been waiting for them to come to her because she felt that she must have their cooperation to take steps that would be necessary to overcome their deficiencies—if it proved possible to do so at all), found them troubled that they could not take a larger part in the unit, and offered to give them individual help. She first assisted them in the immediate problem of writing the letters, both of which were published, to the unconcealed delight of both boys.

Darrell, she found, had an I. Q. of 109, although he was able to read only on the seventh grade level. He responded rapidly to the remedial suggestions which she offered. However, Bob proved to have an I. Q. of only 81. As an experiment she gave him remedial instruction also, but he did not respond. Bob, as she knew, should have been in a speceial class from the first grade.

After spending so much time and work upon a topic, naturally the students did not want to let it die in the class room. They decided (after a suggestion from Miss Grace) to present it in the assembly. This program would have been a failure, however, but for the fact that Miss Grace had insisted that members of the class have questions ready to ask in order to break the ice. As it was, some of the other students were led to participate, and the program was a moderate success.

The great victory, however, was the request of the P. T. A. president to have the panel talk at a P. T. A. meeting. This they did, with an entirely new group. And at this meeting, doting parents and friends plied them with plenty of questions and much applause—and in whose ears does not ring yet the sound of the first applause *for him?*

The day before the election five of the students undertook a door-to-door electioneering campaign. On the day of the election two of the students who had cars helped carry voters to the polls.

The Chamber of Commerce claimed the victory, because of their advertising campaign. So did the J. C.'s. But the pupils of Miss Grace's class had no doubt as to who had influenced the elections. They had, and they were vehement in claiming credit. Some credit was probably due them.

Community-classroom related topics are limited only by the imagination of the teacher and the pupils. A few possible questions for consideration are listed below:

- Is our community large enough to support a community center?
- Should our community have a Teen-Town?
- Why does our town have such dirty streets?
- Christmas decorations—why weren't there more last Christmas?
- Alumni-student dances—should we start them?
- What kind of homecoming program does the public want?
- Should our school invite the public to assembly programs?
- Should our school develop a better program for welcoming eighth graders to high school?
- Is our town big enough to support a city park (zoo, or swimming pool)?
- Would the community welcome a Community Concert Association?
- Could it be supported financially?
- Should we give fire protection to those outside the city limits?
- Are all steps possible being taken to bring more industry to our town?
- Could our community benefit from the installation of parking meters (or their removal)?

There are undoubtedly scores of other possible topics, varying with the needs of the particular community.

The round-table technique is only one of many which may be employed in a successful English class. But it is important, because it gives practice in all of the skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Ordinarily our January issue is the annual anthology of student writing. This year the editor has received so many contributions that he has been unable to complete the job of selecting and preparing material for the January issue. In view of the quality and quantity of the contributions, he is now weighing the possibility of devoting two subsequent issues to student writing, one containing the best poetry and the other containing the best prose.

C. W. R.

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